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AUTHOR Schwartz, Stephen W.
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ABSTRACT

An orientation course at an Ohio college was designed to help college freshmen adjust to the values of a new living/learning community, using personal journal writing to develop the students' coping skills. Life issues considered essential in adult development theory--identity, intimacy, autonomy, and competency--serve as a background for the students' journals, as does Nancy Schlossberg's "Counseling Adults in Transition," which the students are asked to consult. Students are required to read three assigned books about growing up, and to submit a 2,500-word final paper analyzing their journals. The overriding theme that emerges from the journals is the need of freshmen placed in a new environment to gain a sense of self as quickly as possible. In their attempts to adjust, the students endeavor to hold on to the past even as they try to adjust to the present. Their writings reflect this quandary. The one element that rarely finds its way into the journals is their primary reason for being in college: the academic factor. Examining the three assigned readings in terms of transitions and coping strategies, students can see their own lives in the same terms. Gradually, journal entries should become more specific and methodical in self-examination. The hope is that the journal experience helps the students to grow as they move from one stage of adulthood to another. (NKA)

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"DEAR JOURNAL": OUT OF THE MOUTHS OF BABES

Stephen W. Schwartz, Ph.D.
Department of English
Marietta College

Paper Presented at
Conference on College Composition & Communication
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College 101 - The College Experience is an orientation course designed to help freshmen adjust to the values of a new living/learning community by developing their coping skills.

The focus of my talk will be on personal journal writing as a means of enhancing adjustment and coping skills. Before I discuss the journals, I need to describe other components of the course.

Three readings on the theme of growing up are central:

R. Baker - Growing Up
Maya Angelou - I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings
Chaim Potok - My Name Is Asher Lev

After reading these books, students write three papers, one on each book.

They also write a journal, which is turned in every week for comments, and a 2500-word final paper analyzing the journal.

Later on I'll describe how the writing and reading are linked.

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It's a commonplace to describe the freshman year as a transitional period. But for those of us who teach traditional disciplinary courses, the nature of that transition is not always obvious. Only after I began reading journals seven years ago did I begin to understand my students' pre-occupations. Even the reading I had done in adult development theory had only partially prepared me for the experience of reading the journals.

Rather than summarize the continuum of adult development theories, let me mention several life issues that are central to the development of adults.

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Identity: a sense of self and place that each adult gains as an individual. Theorists believe that a crisis of identity recurs whenever an individual faces a major transition.

Intimacy: a relationship based on mutuality and adding support in times of transition.

Autonomy: a set of individual attitudes and ways of doing things. Autonomy involves the perception that individuals control their own destiny. Those who think otherwise are often reduced to apathy, passivity and indecisiveness and are unable to respond positively in a transitional moment.

Competency: a sense of being fit. Major transitions call competency into question.

These life issues should serve as an adequate background for journals I'd like to cite. Excerpts are drawn from seven years worth of journals. In the interest of time, I'll cite only a few, which unfortunately do not yield the full flavor of the freshman year.

The first theme that emerges is the need of freshman placed in an entirely new environment to regain a sense of self as quickly as possible. Consider the obvious: that the beginning freshmen have come from homes and high schools where they've already found their niche. Within their families, they hold an established position. In schools, they've worked for years establishing their identities. Some are known as athletes, some as scholars, some as members of a social elite. Whatever they're known as, the point is that they are known.

> I am feeling so confused. I came here ready to work and for the first two weeks, that is what I did. But somehow my goals got fuzzy and muddled. I don't feel like doing anything--no homework, no exercise, not anything, not even partying. When I go to a party, all I can think about is the homework--the studying I should be doing. When I do homework, I think about the people I want to write letters to. I end up getting nothing accomplished. Before, I always had a definite goal: to go to college. Well, I'm here. Now what?

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Absolutely shitty day! Don't really feel like writing. I don't want to be around anybody. I got the old pink slip from Coach Schaly. After I talked to him, I felt empty as hell. What now? I realize there's more to life than baseball, but I've never been put in this situation before. I can't believe it.

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I can't understand myself. At home I was always such a happy-go-lucky person, and I rarely got depressed. But here it seems as if I'm always depressed and rarely in a carefree, happy state, and I don't like the sound of that at all.

In their attempts to adjust, the freshmen attempt to hold on to the past even as they try to adjust to the present. In the face of insecurity, our freshmen almost uniformly try to hold on to what they left behind, even when what they've left behind is often best left there. Finally, for many there is the shock of recognition that you can't go home again.

Tonight was our high school homecoming parade, pep rally and bonfire. A lot of people changed physically. The whole school seemed different. I don't know why but it did. The students seemed so short. So did my bed. It's like I've outgrown home. It's a scary feeling.

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Today my mother told me that this Thanksgiving is going to be spent at a friend's house. I almost died! I have always had Thanksgiving dinner at home in the same dining room. I can't believe it. The one year when I need something familiar, it gets changed. It's dumb to be upset over it, but I am upset and I am dumb. Every single thing about my life is changing--half for the best and half just for aggravation purposes. But both are making me confused.

The freshman experience is a wrenching dislocation that removes from beginning students the props that have given them security, their sense of self. On the one hand, they want to regain the past that has made their lives meaningful and in which they've been successful. On the other hand, they desperately want to make adjustments to the new environment, both social and academic, to establish a sense of identity in the setting in which they must now make a success of themselves. They try to establish reasonable perimeters in which to operate. They experiment; they rush into relationships; they try new activities--and one result is that they often consider themselves to be out of control, a piece of clay molded by time and events over which they appear to be powerless.

> Pete and I are having problems because he's hanging out with the wrong crowd. They all wear black leather and smoke pot, etc., and it really upsets me. I mean, all I feel is depression over Pete. And I'm exhausted. I sleep over ten hours a day and am still tired. And I'm really worried about Kathy. She was on the boathouse railing smoking pot--all by herself. She doesn't say anything's wrong--ever. But something must be for her to do that, alone, at a school-planned party. Kurt is a terrible influence on her. I wish she'd never met him. Between Pete and them, I've had it up to my elbows--in drugs and alcohol. I always take everyone else's problems to my heart, no matter what it costs me, especially my grades and my sanity.

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Life for freshmen moves at break-neck pace. Relationships form quickly; numerous events compete mercilessly for the freshmen's time. It appears that, in this face-paced world, the center cannot hold. But one element stands outside this face-paced world--an element that rarely makes its way into the journals as a subject of prominence except in a negative sense. This element, as you might guess, is the academic--what we consider to be the primary purpose of the institution, but which appears to take a low position in the freshmen's scheme of things.

Usually, what we read about academic life involves the apparently endless amount of work assigned, the impossibility of managing to get it all done, and, what takes the form almost of a litany, "It's boring."

As you might guess, much time and effort go into writing and reading journals. And not all those who teach College 101 agree that the time is well spent. One colleague writes:

> I feel that keeping a journal is a fine exercise for those students who have the capacity to observe sharply their environment and actions. However, few students have developed this capacity. In the two sections of College 101 that I have taught, four of some forty plus students have kept journals worthy of preservation. Another handful might be said to have gained some insight into personal experience. For a larger number, the journal was just another assignment, and for a few it was a decided waste of time.
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> As an instructor of English, I found a special difficulty in reading these journals. I do not have the professional competence to deal with the problems that some students candidly or inadvertently express. In conversation with colleagues I discovered that revelations of personal heartaches or acts of delinquency surface repeatedly. What is an objective reader to do--report the malefactors? Mother students in distress?
>
> A journal could be a legitimate component of a creative writing class or psychological counseling, but I do not think it serves a significant purpose for most students in College 101.

What a reader is to do, I think, is see herself or himself as a helper. And being a helper is what I attempt through a focus in the course on transitions as an essential part of human development. As the students read books and write papers, I ask that they look at the transitions the protagonists undergo in terms of adult development theory. In particular, Nancy Schlossberg's Counseling Adults in Transition (N.Y., 1984) is very helpful. Dr. Schlossberg suggests the following questions:

1. What is the nature of the transition? Was it anticipated or unanticipated, chronic, an event or a non-event?

2. What is the context of the transition? Does it involve the individual alone or is it interpersonal? Does it involve the individual directly or someone else?

3. What is the impact of the transition? How does it affect relationships, routines, assumptions about the self and world?

4. What appraisal of the transition does the protagonist make?

5. What balance of assets and liabilities does the protagonist bring to the event?

6. What are the coping strategies used to survive the transition:
   a) modifying the situation,
   b) controlling the meaning of the situation,
   c) managing the stress that results?

By examining the 3 readings in terms of transitions and coping strategies, the students will, I hope, begin to look at their own lives in the same terms. As the semester progresses, journal entries should become more specific and more methodical in their self-examination.

When the students work on their final paper, I ask them to examine the journals as a record of transitions and coping strategies.

Sometimes the procedure works, sometimes not.

> I had College 101, a class that, if I had to do it all over again, I wouldn't have taken. Nothing against you, Dr. Schwartz, but the class was to me just another English class. I don't really know what I expected, but it was not book reports. It was an all right class, open and free, but I don't think it prepared me for college--except that through my journal, you helped me to cope with my problems, adjusting and such.

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> I could see quite soon that my relationship with my roommate was doomed. I moved across the hall. Since I left, Chris and I have become friends. This might seem strange, but to me it doesn't. The reason for this is that we were never really enemies--just people who didn't value the same things. I think we both needed room to grow, so we both live alone now. I understand that he's not in the market for a roommate for the second semester either--which doesn't surprise me.

When I first arrived here, I didn't like it at all and I expressed my desire to pack up my bags and go home. The place was unfamiliar, the people were strange, the work was too hard, and the food was lousy. It was like I had been dropped into a dark hole and had no way out. But then I made six friends.
Alan Alda once said the following to Wayne Rodgers in an episode of M*A*S*H: 'You made this place bearable. In a place where all around us is falling apart at the seams, you held me together.' Granted, we are not in a war zone here at Marietta College, but I think that the idea holds true. These six people and others like them have made my stay here for the first semester bearable--even enjoyable.

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Although I'm not always sure of myself and my decisions, I think I did okay for my first semester. There are some rough spots to work out, but life is full of those rough spots. I know I have grown and changed a lot in these few short months. My journal entry for Tuesday, November 15, seems to say it the best. 'When I got up this morning, I started to think about change. We talked in College 101 about how old boyfriend-girlfriend relationships end a lot of the time when one of the persons goes to college. I know it's true, and I thought I accepted the change, but it just occurred to me this morning how much I have changed. That's what is happening to me and Frank. I have changed so much in four months that it's almost scary. In four short months I went from wanting to quit college before I even started, wanting to marry Frank and have his children, to loving college and my independence; wanting to date other guys and go out, and wanting to put my career above all other things; wanting to achieve great success. Maybe this isn't all good, but it can't be all bad either. Life never stops changing. We can't take a break and stop living for even one day. This change isn't always good or for the best, but it is life.

Our hope is that we are giving to students who are more than willing to live the unexamined life a method of self-examination that will increase their ability to be "good consumers of their own education." We hope they will gain, in Schlossburg's words, "the ability (and necessity) to invest, reinvest, and renew commitments as life circumstances change"; that their "capacity to love, work, and play" will grow as they move from one stage of adulthood to the next.